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ABSTRACT

There is an increasing awareness of the usefulness of foreign language training in a number of seemingly diverse areas. Foreign language students develop not only technical skills related to language use but also tangible advantages in the job market because of their increased communication skills. Mastery of languages also enhances the enjoyment of travel abroad and reduces frustration and isolation during travel in other countries. Increased international business opportunities have made meaningful communication and understanding between cultures more valuable, and the individual's ability to understand and empathize across cultural lines is increased with language study. In addition, research suggests that foreign language study enhances both cognitive development and academic achievement. While it is certain that people familiar with more than one language and culture can communicate more effectively with people of other countries and cultures, it is also possible that through learning another language and culture, people become more effective problem-solvers, closer to achieving solutions to pressing social problems because of an increased awareness of a wider set of options. (MSE)

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ERIC DIGEST

ERIC Clearinghouse on
Languages and Linguistics

PERSONAL BENEFITS OF FOREIGN LANGUAGE STUDY

Prepared by H. Jarold Weatherford
October 1986

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
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ERIC CLEARINGHOUSE ON LANGUAGES AND LINGUISTICS

ERIC Digest

Personal Benefits of Foreign Language Study

Prepared by H. Jarold Weatherford

October, 1986

For a long time Americans tended to think that knowing English was sufficient for all their needs. As a result, Americans developed an image as the people who cannot say even the most rudimentary phrase in any other language. Fortunately, however, many business, political, and educational leaders are belatedly realizing that the whole world does not speak English, and that even many of those who have learned English as a second language prefer to converse, to do business, and to negotiate in their native tongue.

Not long ago learning a foreign language was considered to be merely a part of a liberal education or an intellectual exercise through the study of grammar and literature. It was automatically assumed that anyone studying a foreign language as a major field was going to be either a teacher, an interpreter, or a translator and had no other career options. While there is still a need for people in those professions, there is also a growing need for individuals who possess advanced skills in foreign languages and are trained in various technical areas. This is a result of increased activity in international business, the inflow of large amounts of foreign capital to the United States, increased internationalization, and an expanded awareness of the need to conduct not only business but diplomatic relations in the language of the host country. A second language is now becoming a vital part of the basic preparation for an increasing number of careers. Even in those cases where the knowledge of a second language does not help graduates obtain a first job, many report that their foreign language skills often enhance their mobility and improve their chances for promotion.

In addition to any technical skills that foreign language students choose to develop, they also have further tangible advantages in the job market. In a recent study that sought to ascertain which college courses had been most valuable for people who were employed in the business world, graduates pointed not only to career-oriented courses such as business management, but also to people-oriented subjects like psychology, and to classes that had helped them to develop communication skills. Foreign language students, whose courses focus heavily on this aspect of learning, often possess outstanding communication skills, both written and oral. Furthermore, recent trends in the job marketplace indicate a revived recognition of the value of liberal arts training in general in an employee's career preparation.

What About Foreign Language and Travel Abroad?

It is a very common and growing desire of Americans, perhaps especially among young people, to travel abroad. Only a generation or two ago people rarely ventured beyond their home states, but now, as the planet shrinks at an unprecedented pace, large numbers of people travel to other North and South American countries, to Europe, and even to Asia and Africa with increasing frequency for both work and pleasure.

Certainly it is possible to travel in foreign lands without knowing the language. In fact, as much as our generation travels, for many it would be impossible to learn the language spoken in every country that they might visit. Nevertheless, the traveler who knows the language of the country not only has an easier time solving everyday problems associated with travel, but also has a more pleasant experience and greater understanding both of the people of the foreign country and of their culture. Therefore, every language Americans master will enhance their enjoyment and reduce their frustration and isolation as they travel around the world.

How Can Foreign Language Study Help Improve Cultural Understanding and Mutual Communication?

As the globe has shrunk, international business opportunities have multiplied and travel has grown apace. Mutual understanding and meaningful communication between nations, which have always been difficult to achieve, have now gained increased urgency. As a result, significant numbers of people in the United States have begun to call for better international understanding, and many of them have been urging more foreign language study as an important means to attaining this goal. Such exhortations are eminently well-founded, because the study of another language provides the most effective

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tool for penetrating the barrier of a single language and a single culture. Furthermore, experience with another culture enables people to achieve a significantly more profound understanding of their own.

Knowledge of a foreign language is not guaranteed to create empathy with and understanding of the native speakers of that language. However, the development of these qualities in individuals with a desire to understand and empathize is greatly facilitated by language study. Furthermore, foreign language study tends to help dissolve misconceptions and often helps to create feelings of sympathy for native speakers of the language, especially if the study is begun early and pursued for a long period of time.

Does Foreign Language Study Help to Develop Mental Ability or Improve Grades?

There was a time in the United States when learning a foreign language was regarded primarily as a mental discipline for developing intellectual capacity. Even though it is now clear that language learning has numerous applications of both a practical and a humanistic nature, researchers as well as language educators still recognize that spin-off benefits accrue from foreign language study for other academic areas. For example, as Eugene Saviano stated, "The person who has never comprehended, spoken, read or written a language other than his mother tongue has little or no perspective on his own language, . . . he has never penetrated the rich areas of learning and experience lying beyond monolingual communication."

Novelist John Updike attributes the deterioration of writing skills in America to two generations growing up without Latin. "In some curious way, the study of this dead and intricate language enabled writers to write a beautiful, clear idiomatic English." It may be that these benefits are not to be gained only from Latin. As Vermont Royster said, "What is involved is a process in which the study of a different language gives a person an understanding of the nature of language itself, a sense of structure that is difficult to acquire from studying one's own familiar language. Any new language forces us to think why . . . we need to do what we do to express ourselves clearly."

For many decades researchers have attempted to reinforce with empirical evidence the intuitive sense of the value of foreign language study in improving the cognitive functioning of the brain, and many research projects have lent credence to these ideas, particularly that foreign language study enhances a student's achievements in English. For example, one researcher found that students who had taken a foreign language in high school had a significantly higher grade point average in all high school subjects as well as in freshman English courses in college. In addition, data from the Admission Testing Program of the College Board show a definite positive correlation between Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) scores and the study of foreign languages. In one recent test group, for example, students who had taken no foreign language in high school achieved a mean score of 366 on the verbal portion of the SAT, and 409 on the math portion. Students who had taken only one year of a foreign language had slightly higher scores (378 and 416), whereas students with two years of a foreign language showed more dramatic increases (417 and 463). Each additional year of language study brought a further rise in scores, with students who had studied a language for five years or more achieving an average of 504 on the verbal and 535 on the math portion of the exam.

The College Board also calculated correlations between length of study of certain subjects, including English, math, biological sciences, physical sciences, and social studies, and SAT scores, and found that in almost all cases the longer a student studied one of these subjects, the higher were the scores. However, the verbal scores of students who had taken four or five years of a foreign language were higher than verbal scores of students who had studied any other subject for an equal length of time. Similar results have been obtained by other researchers who have examined foreign language study and SAT scores.

A number of studies in bilingual education also seem to lead to the conclusion that foreign language study can aid and even accelerate the cognitive development of the brain. Bilingual subjects in various tests have outperformed similar monolingual subjects on verbal and nonverbal tests of intelligence. This discovery has led some researchers to speculate that bilinguals may have a language ability that enables them to achieve greater mental flexibility. Along with the certainty that people who know more than one language and culture can communicate more effectively with people of other countries and cultures, it is indeed possible that through learning another language and culture, people become more effective problem-solvers, closer to achieving solutions to pressing social problems because of an increased awareness of a wider set of options.

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